

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
FLOOR STATEMENT ON TSUNAMI BILL, H.R. 1674
December 6, 2006

Mr. Speaker:

In just about two weeks, we will reach the second anniversary of the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami that began off the coast of Indonesia, and resulted in the deaths of at least 150,000 people, and the injuring and dislocation of millions more. It was an event that stunned the entire world and eventually prompted an enormous outpouring of international aid. Among other things, the event was a reminder of the often forgotten but awesome power of nature, which we ignore at our peril.

But an acknowledgement of nature's power does not mean that we are powerless. Quite the contrary, we needlessly seal our own doom if we fail to take steps that can reduce the impact of natural disasters at home and abroad. And in the case of tsunamis, which by definition travel across the seas, paying no mind to international borders, the approach has to be global to be effective.

The tsunamis that can cause damage in the U.S. are just as likely to begin overseas as off our own coasts. And in addition to humanitarian concerns, the U.S. pays a high price, both in aid and in threats to international stability, when cataclysmic death results from tsunamis overseas.

So we need to take action to improve the understanding of tsunamis by both scientists and the general public, to improve our detection of tsunamis and to improve our ability to issue warnings about approaching tsunamis and to ensure populations know how to respond to such warnings.

Happily, we are not starting from scratch in any of these areas. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) already runs research, detection, warning and outreach programs, and the Administration began augmenting those programs in 2005 after the Indian Ocean tsunami.

But we need to ensure that the focus on tsunamis continues even as memories of the 2004 tragedy fade, and we need to further strengthen the Administration program along the lines of expert advice we have heard at Science Committee hearings. The experts were particularly concerned that more be done in the area of outreach so that the public understands more about tsunamis and what to do if one is approaching. They also called for more research so we could predict tsunamis and their paths more accurately.

I should add here that tsunamis are not a theoretical threat for the U.S. The seismically active West Coast is particularly vulnerable and has experienced tsunamis in the past. Even a very small tsunami can cause damage. An earthquake off the coast of Japan last month produced a tsunami that hit California with wave surges of only five or six feet, but it still caused an estimated \$700,000 in damage in just one town.

So we need to maintain and strengthen the nation's tsunami programs. That's exactly what H.R. 1674 would do. It would give specific, continuing Congressional direction to efforts in tsunami research, prediction, detection, warning and outreach – the full spectrum of needed activities.

The bill would also improve Congressional oversight of the program by requiring updates on the condition of tsunami monitoring equipment and several studies of the overall effectiveness of the tsunami program.

This is a good, carefully targeted, economical, bipartisan bill. I want to thank my co-sponsor Jay Inslee for all of his hard work and persistence on this bill. He understands well how his constituents in Washington State could be in harm's way from a tsunami. I also want to thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle on the Science Committee, who, as usual, contributed to this bill, which passed the Committee long ago by voice vote.

I also want to thank the Transportation and Infrastructure and International Relations Committees for working with us on their jurisdictional claims. And finally I want to thank Senators Stevens and Inouye and their staffs for working with us to put together a compromise bill. This bill is ready for Senate action and should go to the President for signature this week.

Mr. Speaker, we ought to act now to prevent future tragedies from tsunamis. We can't prevent tsunamis, but we can greatly limit the loss of life from them. This bill will help us do just that both in the U.S. and abroad. I urge its passage.

Thank you, and I reserve the balance of my time.